

BOOK REVIEWS

EDITED BY LIZA VICK



AESTHETICS, PHILOSOPHY

Rethinking Hanslick: Music, Formalism, and Expression. Edited by Nicole Grimes, Siobhán Donovan, and Wolfgang Marx. (Eastman Studies in Music, vol. 97.) Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013. [xv, 360 p. ISBN 9781580464321. \$90.] Abbreviations, chronology, bibliography, index.

Rethinking Hanslick: Music, Formalism, and Expression is a significant reassessment of the work of nineteenth-century aesthetician and music critic Eduard Hanslick. A foremost advocate of absolute music and the godfather of musical formalism according to some, Hanslick is historically important chiefly for his 1854 treatise *On the Musically Beautiful*, in which he argues that music is by nature self-referential and autonomous, and is therefore unsuitable to represent the external world, ideas, and feelings. This philosophical position put him in opposition to Richard Wagner and other members of the New German School, who advocated for programmatic music as the way of the future. Articles in *Rethinking Hanslick* posit that the traditional scholarly focus on Hanslick's historical position, based on *On the Musically Beautiful* alone, neglects his overall contribution as a bourgeois intellectual; as Nicole Grimes points out in the introduction, this results in the framing of his aesthetics with simplistic polarities such as form/expression, absolute/program music, etc. (p. 2). More often than not, Hanslick's later output as a critic with the Viennese *Neue freie Presse*, as well as his autobiography, have either been used to explain his arguments in the treatise or omitted altogether. *Rethinking Hanslick* is a much-needed collection of studies that reevaluate Hanslick's overall output in a broader cultural context, in particular that of Vienna in the second half of the nineteenth century. While a few articles are needlessly dense and difficult to read, there are several underlying concepts that help to string

the articles together and provide assurance to the reader that the authors are on the right investigative paths.

James Deaville's opening article on Hanslick reception since the publication of *On the Musically Beautiful* in 1854 (Leipzig: R. Weigel) shows that Hanslick's work as a whole has been received differently depending on individual agendas (e.g., defamation by the Nazis on the basis of his Jewishness and subsequent voices in defense of him from outside Central Europe). One noteworthy idea the reader may gather from Deaville's article is that since 1854, the treatise's polemical tone has never failed to elicit reactions, either positive or negative. As an example of the individual agendas that Deaville discusses, Anthony Pryer's article on Hanslick's methodology shows that, while it is true that the treatise does a better job of informing the reader of what music *is not* rather than what it *is* (the latter, unfortunately, does not go much beyond the claim that music consists of tonally moving forms), the focus on the negatives relates to the practice of law in Hanslick's time: contemporaneous legal procedures placed considerable emphasis on showing that the accusations against a defendant were false or insufficient (that is, what it *is not*), rather than proving that the defendant was wholly innocent (what it *is*). After all, as Pryer reminds the reader, Dr. Hanslick was a doctor of law, not music or philosophy.

One prevalent idea in the book is that Hanslick's inconsistencies are not necessarily a shortcoming, as they are manifestations

of his efforts to “reconcile” beauty with logic. Using Otakar Hostinsky’s 1877 *Das Musikalisch-Schöne und das Gesamtkunstwerk vom Standpunkte der formalen Aesthetik* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel) as a contrasting text, Felix Wörner shows that while Hostinsky believes that performance (i.e., the acoustical realization of notation) is crucial in making an aesthetic judgment of a musical work, Hanslick argues that a work is essentially finalized in the score. Fred Everett Maus reminds the reader that Hanslick downplays the significance of embodiment in his treatise to signify the ontological importance of music, and in the process tones down the role of the composer and performance. Yet, as Maus also shows, even as Hanslick argues that music should be contemplated based on its sonic materials alone, there are still at least six ways in which the composer is present in Hanslick’s aesthetics. His “failure” to exclude the composer in musical experience with convincing success only reminds the reader of his position as an aesthetician dealing with the elusive quality of beauty, with the agenda of rejecting the eighteenth-century aesthetics of feelings and contemplating the musically beautiful with a more cerebral approach.

Some articles in *Rethinking Hanslick* are convincing studies of Hanslick’s inconsistencies and ambivalence in relation to his upbringing and surroundings. Take, for example, Hanslick’s view of the distinctively Viennese cultural tradition of waltz music. In Chantal Frankenbach’s article, the reader learns that Hanslick often expressed genuine admiration for the waltz both as a musical tradition and a social function, yet it was difficult for him to reconcile the physical experience of dance with the more educated mode of cerebral listening. The necessarily simplistic phrase structure and potpourri-like form as embodiment of the Austrian folk tradition also disqualified waltz music from being suitable for a higher mode of aesthetic contemplation. Complementing Frankenbach’s article, Dana Gooley shows that Hanslick’s ambivalence toward Johann Strauss Jr. was affected by a broader cultural viewpoint of his time: even though the elite *Bildungsbürgertum* recognized the *Kleinbürgertum* as an integral part of a harmonized bourgeois society, the former nonetheless considered

the latter to be culturally inferior. Despite the fact that Hanslick greatly appreciated the waltz’s cultural significance and enjoyed the melodic inventiveness of Strauss Jr.’s music, his intellectual endeavor conflicted with what he might have greatly valued at heart. The evolution of Strauss from writing folkloristic waltz music to incorporating waltz elements into operetta and later *opéra comique* also mirrored a liberal ideal that embraced tradition and progress (p. 103), but regrettably the two sensibilities were not always in concert with each other.

One issue in Hanslick’s output that might be misconstrued as a personality flaw, unless the contemporaneous attitude toward the topic is taken into consideration, is the general discrimination against the female sex. Marion Gerards explains in her article that the use of gender connotations was part of the cultural practice, specifically that “masculine” connoted seriousness and strength while “feminine” suggested the opposite. Nina Noeske also notes that Hanslick’s organism metaphor was in line with prevalent philosophical and scientific ideas on the interaction of body, soul, and matter. An “organically unified” composition is therefore one that is natural, beautiful, and reasonable. Hanslick’s use of descriptive terms on that front thus conforms to the cultural practice of his time and place.

As a staunch guardian of absolute music, Hanslick’s relatively mild opinion on Dvořák’s program music is noteworthy. David Larkin’s investigation into Hanslick’s attitude toward the symphonic poems of Dvořák and Richard Strauss shows that, while the critic routinely disapproved of Strauss’s output, with Dvořák’s programmatic works Hanslick expressed more sorrow than anger. Reviewing an 1899 concert conducted by Gustav Mahler that included Strauss’s *Aus Italien* and Dvořák’s *The Wood Dove*, Hanslick concluded that the latter was unfortunately the more programmatic of the two; however, in Larkin’s words, Hanslick compared *The Wood Dove* to “a fair prisoner chained to guards and constrained to follow their path” (p. 299), while *Aus Italien* was disparaged as a sonically clever work that lacked musical creativity. Here, Hanslick’s admiration for Dvořák’s sound world, recognition of the composer’s contribution to “the kingdom

of absolute music," and perhaps even their personal friendship likely prevented the critic from dismissing Dvořák's program music altogether, showing that Hanslick did not always employ a dogmatic mode of criticism.

Hanslick saw himself as an educated bourgeois individual who belonged to the German *Bildungsbürgertum*, and as Lauren Freede points out, his Jewish heritage never comes to the fore in his autobiography. This is evidenced in David Brodbeck's study of Hanslick's opinion on the music of Carl Goldmark, whose musical "Jewish-Orientalism" prevented Hanslick from approving his music wholeheartedly. All the same, racial attacks from Wagner and escalating Viennese anti-Semitism after 1897, when the Christian Social mayor Karl Lueger took office, likely made it impossible for Hanslick to ignore his Jewish heritage. This, in part, helps to explain Hanslick's generally positive attitude toward Mahler's music on a personal if not musical level. Regardless of Mahler's Wagnerian musical language and nonconventional uses of forms, Hanslick identified himself, as David Kasunic argues in his article, with the "belonging-while-not-belonging" aspect of the tradition-bending symphonies and lieder of Mahler, who was of Jewish origin.

Despite his cerebral approach to listening that seems to defy feelings at times, Hanslick was ultimately moved by humanistic qualities such as moral freedom, learnedness, and universality, which to him were encompassed in the expressive power of absolute music. Also, as Nicole Grimes suggests in her article, Hanslick saw the serene instrumental postlude that takes place after the abject conclusion of Hölderlin's poem in Johannes Brahms's *Schicksalslied* as exemplifying the transfiguring power of instrumental music. In that sense, *Schicksalslied* is similar to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in that it demonstrates instrumental music's capability to break free of the confines of text and fulfill a higher expressive potential.

Timothy R. McKinney's article on Hanslick and Hugo Wolf sheds light on the strenuous relationship between a contentious young critic who would rather compose and an established critic. Curiously, this detail-filled article conveys the impression that prior to 1894, the year

Hanslick finally reviewed Wolf's music with grudging respect in the *Neue freie Presse*, the elderly critic's earlier silence toward the youngster's pugnacious comments about him stemmed from a lack of interest rather than calculated reservation. This article informs the reader more of Wolf's struggle than Hanslick's opinions.

In conclusion, taking Hanslick's 1854 *On the Musically Beautiful* as a starting point, *Rethinking Hanslick* is a noteworthy volume that opens new doors to future studies on Hanslick's stance as an aesthetician and critic in the appropriate sociocultural context. The book also succeeds in presenting numerous complex issues surrounding the general output of Hanslick in a coherent manner without making them repetitive, a strength that is sometimes lacking in similar scholarly compilations.

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Skryabin, Philosophy and the Music of Desire. By Kenneth M. Smith. (Royal Musical Association Monographs, no. 19.) Farnham, Surrey, Eng.: Ashgate, 2013. [xi, 161 p. ISBN 9781409438915. \$99.95.] Music examples, illustrations, bibliography, index.

Kenneth M. Smith's monograph provides an interdisciplinary study of Aleksandr Scriabin's music through Scriabin's own philosophy of desire (as well as philosophies that he was exposed to), semiotic-psychoanalytical theory, and music analysis. While there is already a great body of analytical work on Scriabin's music, there are fewer works that try to shed light on Scriabin's music through his own philosophical ideals. Smith's book addresses this important gap; he examines Scriabin's music through extramusical interpretations, which he ties to selected musical works. The book provides an important intersection between the composer's ideology and his art, something that is often overlooked in the scholarly world.

The book is organized into five chapters (and a short introduction). Each chapter begins with quotations largely drawn from Scriabin and Leonid Sabaneev (Scriabin's close friend and biographer), expressing